

[Shorty]

19914

Roaldus Richmond

35 School Street

Montpelier, Vt.

SHORTY - THE HAPPIEST MAN IN TOWN

"I supported my wife for fifteen years," said Shorty. "Why in hell shouldn't she support me for awhile now? It's only fair, ain't it? Sure it is."

He was about five-feet-four, an absurd swaggering little Frenchman with bright pop eyes behind spectacles and an eternal toothy grin on his dark wrinkled monkey-face. His barking laugh and his ceaseless chatter, his high-spirited ribaldry and colorful profanity, made the jaunty devil-may-care Shorty a town character. Nothing ever daunted or depressed him. He had little in the world and he asked for little. No property, no automobile, no money in the bank, no clothes, and no prospects for the future. Yet they said Shorty was the happiest man in town.

He dressed always in blue jeans, a faded blue workshirt open at the neck, or a dirty cotton undershirt in warm weather. His arms, shoulders and body was surprisingly muscular and tanned to a saddle-brown. His little frame was sturdy and healthy. A railroad cap was tilted crazily on his head, a cigarette rested behind one ear. After a few ales Shorty talked endlessly and inanely, a ridiculous flow of nonsense, sometimes humorous, sometimes boring.

Library of Congress

When Shorty got going good the barroom, his daytime habitat, would reecho with good-natured protestations — “Tune that thing down.” — “Shut that noise off.” — “Turn [???] 2 over the record.” — “Try a new neddle.” — “Don't you ever run down, Shorty?” — “He's had enough, throw him out.” — “Get another station.” — “Gag the little bastard.” — “Call the cops.” — “Hell, call his keeper.”

And Shorty would say dolefully: “Why they always pickin' on me? For chrisake. I never did nothin' to them. I'm all right, ain't I? I'm a good feller. I work when I can. What you goin' do when you can't get no job? My wife's got a good job, so I do the cookin' and housekeepin'. That's fair enough, ain't it? What more you expect of a guy? I always take odd jobs if I can get 'em. I'm a good worker. You ask anybody I ever worked for, they'll tell you.

“I'm a Frenchman, boy, and the French are tough. The best soldiers in the world!” Shorty struck a pose, as with a bayoneted rifle. “They shall not pass! Vive la France! You think they ain't tough? Look at me — no winter underwear since the middle of April. How you like that? You watch them Frenchmen go into Germany. Yah, is that so? — They will like hell chase the French back into the English channel! They never saw tho day. You goddam Wops can't talk about fightin' with a Frenchman. What'd Italy ever do, who'd they ever lick? Nobody but Ethiopia, for chrisake. The Eyetalians was the worst soldiers in the last war. They don't ever dare get into this one.

“I'm in good shape, boy. Don't forget it. Look at that muscle. Feel of that arm if you don't think so. I ain't soft. I always worked hard. Maybe I ain't big, but neither was Napoleon. Don't worry, I done every kind of work. I 3 worked in lumberyards. I shoveled coal, I worked on the steel gang — railroadin'. I done bridge and road construction. All heavy work, hard work. I can make a shovel sing a song, boy. Aw, shut up, you shanty Irishman. Wheel-barrows was invented to teach the Irish to walk on their hind legs! I was a lumper in the stonesheds, but I don't know nothin' about granite or stone-cuttin'. I don't want to either. I been a grunt on power-line jobs, and I done some climbin' too.” (“ All you ever

Library of Congress

clumb was a woman, you weasel!" from the next booth). Shorty barked with laughter. "Yeah, I done some of that too," he confessed.

"I was born right here and I always lived here. It's good enough for me. You can have your cities, you can have your farms. Gimme a town this size. I got a nice wife, a good-lookin' wife, boy — and three nice kids. Yeah, maybe one of 'em is bigger'n me but I can-still take care of him. You oughta see my wife —"

Interruptions from nearby booths: "Tell 'em about the time you got her in the rocking-chari, Shorty." — "Tell 'em about the time you cut the hole in her pajamas." — "Tell 'em how you came home and caught her bending over mopping the floor."

Shorty laughed and swore explosively. "You guys go to hell, he said. "Anyway, what business they got moppin' floors with them short shirts on? I'm a man, I am. They can't get away with that stuff when I'm around!"

"How about the time you caught your wife with that Fuller Brush salesman, Shorty?" 4 "That," said Shorty indignantly, "is a goddam lie. I personally can take care of my wife — alone. Don't worry none about that. That guy was just showin' her how a brush worked, that's all my wife don't have to shop round outside any. I'm a good man, boy. I keep her satisfied."

"Shorty,tell about the time the priest came in here and dragged you out by the collar."

"Aw, he didn't do nothin' of the kind." Shorty said. "He just wanted to talk to me, that's all. That priest's a good friend of mine. I ain't missed a Sunday in twenty years. I'm headin' for heaven."

"I s'pose you were in church that Sunday mornin' the game-warden caught you with short trout, fishing out of season without a license, and using a stolen pole besides."

Library of Congress

Shorty threw up his grimy hands in despair. "What can a guy do? What chance has a guy got with them wolves? I give up.

"But they don't mean nothin'. Shorty went on confidentially. "They're good guys, great guys. Why, they'd gimme the shirt right off'n their back—if they had a shirt. If I get in a jam they help me out, every time. If I get pinched they pay my fine. Sure, that's the kinds guys they are. They know Shorty's all right too, and don't forget it. That's why I like this town. Some real guys in it, some reg'lar guys. Best guys in the world. Course there's some p —pots here too. They think they're big shots. But we don't pay no attention to 'em. Don't associate with 'em at all. 5 "I'm forty years old, boy, right in the prime of life. Life begins at forty. Why, I ain't even started yet. I was born here, but my old man came down from Sherbrooke, Quebec. He made plenty dough lumberin' once, but he lost it all. Us kids spent it for him — there was eleven of us. I told my wife I was stoppin' with three. I seen what eleven kids done to my old man."

More interruptions: "Shorty, remember when you went home carrying a new broom over your shoulder with six rolls of toilet paper on the handle of it? Was you playing soldier then?" — "How about those chickens you stole off your neighbor up there?" — ("Them chickens was scratchin' up my garden," Shorty shouted. "I only done it in self-defense.")

"I never seen such a bunch of liars," Shorty said sadly, wagging his head. "They've lied so long they can't tell the truth no more. I got plenty on them fellers too — but I don't talk."

"Not much!" somebody jeered. "That's all you do do."

"You go fry your can," said Shorty. Then, with some pride: "I guess I am a crazy bastard. But you got to have some fun, ain't you? I have pulled some pretty good ones, I guess. I've had my fun. I could tell you some good ones — but you prob'ly heard 'em before. If you ain't you will. With this gang here I don't need no press agent.

Library of Congress

"What'd I do if I could do just what I wanted to? I'd prob'ly sit right here and drink ale, all day long, every day in the year." ("That's all you do anyway, for chrisake.") 6 Yes sir, I believe in takin' it easy, gettin' some enjoyment outa life. I ain't goin' to worry myself into no grave. I ain't goin' to work myself to death neither. Life's too short. All right", maybe I don't like work. Who the hell does?

"But I've worked plenty in my time. I can shovel with anybody — dirt, snow coal, anythin'. I can use a hammer and saw with anybody. I can handle lumber and I know lumber. But nowadays a man can't earn a decent day's pay, can he? So why work?

"I get all the ale I want. I run errands for it if I have to. If they need some meat for sandwiches here I go get it and they give me an ale. If somebody shootin' pool next door wants a pint I go after it, and they buy me an ale. If they need some change here it's Shorty that gets it for 'em. Shorty's Special Delivery Service — Anywhere in Town for an Ale! That's me."

"Hey, Shorty," interposed a listener. "How about that time you and Graf Griffo were up shingling Old Lady Marlowe's roof? They was up there on the roof and it was getting pretty hot in the sun, I guess. Shorty climbed down and the old Lady asked him where he was going. I guess she could tell from the thirsty look in Shorty's eye. Shorty says: 'I got to go down-town to see a feller. It's about another job me and Graf got. 'The Old Lady says: 'Well, when are you going to finish this job here?' Shorty scratched his head a minute and says: "Well, it all depends! If we get this other job we'll finish up here tomorrow. If we don't 7 it'll take us three-four days more."

"Sure," Shorty said. "I'm honest, ain't I? Honesty is the best policy. I ain't lyin' to a poor old lady like that. What do you think I am?

I ain't big but I'm tough. Honest and tough. One day I was diggin' down in a ditch. There was big sonofabitch up on top kept sprinklin' dirt down my neck. He was seven feet tall,

Library of Congress

prob'ly eight. I got sick of that guy. He kept makin' cracks: 'I know now why they call Frenchmen frogs. Looka that little tadpole down in the mud there.' Then he'd, spit and say: 'Lookout you don't get drowned in that spit, Froggy.' I climbed out with my shovel and told him I was goin' to cut him down to my size and kick Jesus Christ and the Twelve Disciples outa him. He took a swing with his shovel and I ducked. The wind of it knocked down three guys that was twenty feet off. I jumped high as I could and bent that old shovel over his skull. It put his head right down between his shoulderblades. I hit him so hard he was humpbacked for three years after. It cracked his skull like rotten ege. He went out like a candle. No. it didn't kill him. He was too mean to die anyway... But I can take care of myself and don't forget it. You can't keep a good little man down.

"If you want to see fightin' you shoulda seen this place when the CCC's was here, buildin' the East Barre dam and the Wrightsville dam. They sold beer by the pitcher in them days. They had a dozen fights every night. A big nigger used to sing in here; Cokey Joe played the piano; a crazy Indian 8 played the drums. That big nigger married a white girl in town. Honest to Christ, and was she proud of that black bastard!

"When the CCC's was here they had about a dozen girls upstairs. They did a damn good business too, boy. They was kept plenty busy, I'm tellin' yuh. Now they's only a few strays left around, and they're no good. One of 'em told me the other day, she says: 'Shorty, I can't make a livin' in this town no more!' I guess she's right. Too much free stuff floatin' round. Too much competition from these office girls. "This is a good town though. I like it. I have a good time here, boy. I have more goddam fun... I don't need money and cars and nice clothes, I make my own fun. If a guy wants to spend his life sweatin' and slavin' and workin' that's his business. If a man wants to inhale that granite dust every day let him go ahead. It ain't my idea of a good time, grindin' away at that goddam stone day after day until your lungs fill up and your face turns gray like the granite. Not for Shorty, I got respect for them stonecutters too, don't think I ain't. They made this town all right. They put this state on the map. You got to hand it to them.

Library of Congress

"Well, boys," said Shorty, sighing and stretching. "Buy me another ale and I'll be going. Got to get home and cook dinner for the wife and kids." He downed his ale with a flourish, cocked his cap over one bright eye and rose to leave. Laughter rose with him and Shorty glared about ferociously. Then he grinned through the scowl and laughed 9 his peculiar barking laugh, head tossed backed.

"All right, laugh, you goddam hyenas," said Shorty. "You can laugh. But I'm still a good cook, and don't forget it." And he swaggered toward, laughing and singing, a diminutive and dingy cavalier, the happiest man in town.